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How to Win an Afghan Election

Perceptions and Practices

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Analysts following the Afghan elections have been largely engaged in speculations over who will win and what the most likely scenarios are in terms of turnout, voting patterns and the potential for violence. Less attention has been paid to the dynamics surrounding the actual political contest and their implications for Afghanistan's future political process. Afghans on the other hand view the upcoming elections with a mix of indifference and anticipation. There is a widespread conviction that the elections will be 'fixed' by a combination of international interference, deals between political leaders and fraud. Such perceptions are not necessarily incorrect and they are definitely not irrelevant. If left unaddressed they will further erode public confidence, leading to greater disengagement and possible violent disaffection (although not necessarily in the context of the elections). In order to strengthen the process of democratisation in Afghanistan it is essential to understand what the political dynamics are and how they are perceived by Afghans. This paper seeks to contribute to that understanding.

The paper's discussion follows the perception widely held among Afghans that the outcome of the elections is shaped by four main factors: (1) decisions by international actors, in particular the US; (2) behind-the-scenes negotiations and deals among local leaders; (3) manipulation of the electoral process; and – only in the fourth place, if at all – (4) the vote of the people. The prevalence of insecurity, moreover, makes many people wonder how meaningful their vote will be and whether the elections will take place at all.

First of all, Afghans believe that international actors, and in particular the US, determine who will be the next President of Afghanistan. Changing perceptions on the US stance towards President Karzai, often based on relatively small events, have had a great impact on the trajectory of his candidacy. Efforts by the US administration to emphasise its impartiality have somewhat countered the impression that Hamed Karzai is their candidate, but have not persuaded the electorate that the US will play no role in the elections' outcome. People still try to read the signs to find out who the candidate of choice is.

Secondly, Afghans see that their leaders are trying to predetermine the outcome of the elections, as well as the post-election division of power, using all the opportunities provided by a patronage-based society. This is used by candidates who seek to secure the backing of powerful patrons and to rearrange the field of rivals through a complex game of negotiations and deals. They try to limit and undermine strong rivals within their own constituency; gather expressions of support, in particular from leaders of other constituencies; set up a core team of well-networked personalities to organise the on-the-ground outreach; and persuade everybody that this is 'the winning side.' An analysis of how Karzai has sought to strengthen his position over the last six months provides an illustrative example of how this is done.

Thirdly, Afghans witnessed the fraud and manipulation during the 2004 and 2005 elections and still feel a sense of disappointment over the range of characters that were allowed to run. There is a widespread expectation that things will not be better during the 2009 elections: the shortcomings of oversight and the challenges posed by insecurity provide ample opportunity for electoral fraud, in particular through over-registration (including 'phantom female voters'), mass proxy voting and cooptation of electoral staff, while the process of vetting was as arbitrary as it had been in the past. The recruitment of campaign networks that include violent commanders and the threat posed by the Taliban, moreover, means that the elections will take place in an environment of fear in considerable parts of the country.

The perception that the elections are being fixed, whether by the internationals, by factional deal-making or by fraud, has led to a sense of disempowerment and disengagement among the electorate. This has however not prevented the political class, consisting of lower level political leaders and representatives, from being actively engaged in the process. They act as political brokers, mediating between candidates and vote banks. Because alliances are not fixed, there is a complex process of consultation, negotiation and courtship in which candidates, brokers and voters (often in blocs) engage. The ensuing alliances are unstable: political brokers exaggerate the size of their vote banks and the influence they have over it; voters ignore instructions or disregard their pledges; and candidates make promises they cannot or do not intend to keep.

The system of political brokers and deal-making is based on the assumption that voters will follow the instructions of their main ethnic, tribal and political or factional leaders. Voters and political brokers are however often unclear on how they will decide on who to align themselves to. This paper discusses six, partly overlapping, principles that play a role in voter decisions. The fact that voters are pulled in different directions makes their behaviour difficult to predict. Even though many of them will probably end up siding with what they see as the most powerful or stable party, there is an appetite for non-factional alignment. This, together, with the changing behaviour of the urban young, may chip away at the expected voting patterns along ethnic, tribal and factional lines.

This paper explicitly does *not* argue that elections as a system is unsuited for Afghanistan or that the population was 'not ready' for greater political representation. It also does not propagate an exploration of alternative options, as they risk being dangerously messy and equally prone to manipulation and backroom deals. A study of the main political processes however does raise the question how to organise democratic elections in the absence of functioning democratic institutions, in an environment where there is little trust and where power continues to be defended through manipulation and violence. Key issues that will need to be further explored in order to ensure that elections are politically meaningful include: how to respond to a flawed election; what do 'good' elections look like in the context of patronage politics; and what should the role of the international community be.

Practical recommendations include:

- an unambiguous acknowledgement of electoral realities and a firm reiteration of the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC), the international community, and the candidates, their campaign teams and the political brokers;
- a strategic but subtle use by the international community of its potential role as an impartial arbiter;
- a thoughtful political strategy on the part of the international community on whom to engage with and a greater acknowledgement of the importance of parties and networks other than those made up of the main ethnic and factional leaders;
- a renewed push by all actors to address the systemic and institutional problems that are hampering the holding of more democratic elections.